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ABSTRACT

The influence of sex and gender-role orientation on social support and coping with occupational stressors was examined through interviews with 19 male and 20 female managers who were matched for job level. It was hypothesized that instrumentality would be related to problem-focused coping, whereas expressivity would be related to coping by seeking social support. It was further expected that those high in instrumentality would be more likely to seek informational support, whereas those high in expressivity would be more likely to seek emotional support in stressful situations. The results support the contention that few sex differences in coping with work stress emerge when males and females are equivalent in occupation and position. Women reported experiencing more job-related stressors and coping with general stressful situations through self-blame more often than did men. Androgynous managers were least likely, and undifferentiated managers most likely, to cope using wishful thinking. Managers who were high in expressivity perceived themselves to be under less stress and to have received more social support in specific stressful situations than those low in expressivity. (Author/NB)

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Gender, Social Support, and Coping with Work Stressors Among Managers

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The influence of sex and gender-role orientation on social support and coping with occupational stressors was examined through interviews with 19 male and 20 female managers who were matched for job level. Women reported experiencing more job-related stressors and coping with general stressful situations through self-blame more often than men. Androgynous managers were least likely, and undifferentiated managers most likely, to cope using wishful thinking. Managers who were high in expressivity perceived themselves to be under less stress and to have received more social support in specific stressful situations than those low in expressivity.

Gender, Social Support, and Coping with Work Stressors Among Managers

We examined the influence of sex and gender-role orientation upon social support and coping with stressors in the work environment. Research has suggested that gender-role orientation is an important predictor of both social support (Ashton & Fuerher, in press; Burda, Vaux, & Schill, 1984) and coping (Long, 1990; Nezu & Nezu, 1987) and that some previously reported sex differences in these areas may be attributable to gender rather than to biological sex.

Gender-role orientation has not previously been investigated in relation to managers' attempts to cope with the specific job-related stressors that they experience nor their mobilization of social support for work-related problems. However, Nezu and Nezu (1987), using a student sample, found that instrumentality was related to problem-solving rather than emotion-focused coping. Similarly, Long (1989) found that among a sample of women in traditional and nontraditional occupations, instrumentality was associated with problem-focused and preventative coping.

In the realm of social support, Ashton and Fuehrer (in press) found no differences between the emotional and instrumental support sought by women, but that men (especially those who were low in expressivity) sought less emotional than instrumental support. Similarly, Burda, Vaux, and Schill (1984) found social support to be a function of expressiveness, with feminine and androgynous individuals having more support resources available to them than masculine and undifferentiated individuals. Both studies, however, employed nonmanagerial samples.

Based on these findings, we expected that instrumentality would be related to problem-focused coping, whereas expressivity would be related to coping by seeking social support. Furthermore, we expected that those high in instrumentality would be more likley to seek informational support, whereas those high in expressivity would be more likley to seek emotional support in stressful situations. However, in general, we expected that receipt of social support would be a function of expressivity rather than instrumentality.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 19 male and 20 female managers employed by a utility company or one of two insurance companies. Their positions ranged from middle (section manager) to upper (operations manager or director) management with the men and women matched as closely as possible for occupation and job level. The mean age was 43.7 years for the men and 36.9 years for the women. Eighty-four percent of the men and 75% of the women were married; 90% of the men and 50% of the women were parents.

Measures

Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974). The BSRI was used to assess gender-role orientation.

Job Stress Scale. (= .9) The job stress scale (Chemers, Hays, Rhodewalt & Wysocki, 1985) had 24 items measuring perceived stress in four areas of a manager's job: stress with boss, task, subordinates, and coworkers. The response scale ranged from 1 no stress at all to 5 extreme stress. We used this measure because it taps job stress in general rather than stress as a response to specific stressors.

Critical Incidents. To assess the types of stressors experienced, we asked subjects to describe two recent work-related stressful events. We assessed the nature of the problems by having subjects describe two different situations: 1) a specific stressful situation that represented the kind of events they typically had to deal with and 2) a more general aspect of their job that was stressful. To assess the reasons such situations were viewed as stressful, we then asked subjects to describe what it was about each situation that had made it stressful.

We assessed coping with the problem by asking subjects to describe the ways they had dealt with each situation. We assessed coping with feelings about the problem by asking them to describe how they had handled their feelings about each problem.

Received social support was assessed by asking the subjects to recall the people on and off the job who thay had spoken with at the time of the stressful situations and who they considered to be helpful or not helpful. Subjects also described who had initiated the involvement of each person, the reason why the person was involved, and the particular behaviors performed by

each person that were helpful or not helpful. The functions of social support were also assessed by having the subjects rate, using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 none to 5 an extreme amount, the overall helpfulness of each person and the amount of informational, tangible, and emotional support each person had provided.

We chose a critical incidents technique to assess stress, coping, and social support because we felt it would provide in-depth information about specific real life stressful situations from the phenomenological perspective of the subjects. We felt this technique would capture those areas most salient to the subjects, some of which might be overlooked by reliance on paper and pencil measures alone.

Ways of Coping Checklist. We also assessed coping strategies via Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro and Becker's (1985) modification of Folkman and Lazarus' (1980) Ways of Coping Checklist (WCCL). Subjects responded to the 42 items by indicating the extent to which they had used each strategy to deal with each of the stressful situations they had described. The reliabilities for the five WCCL subscales for the

general and the specific situations were: problem focused (= .74 and .73), seeks social support (= .55 and .54), wishful thinking (= .84 and .82), blamed self (= .66 and .37), and avoidance (=.70 and .45).

We selected this measure based on it's established validity and because it provided a more quantitative approach to the assessment of coping than the critical incidents task. In addition, we believed that it would elicit information about coping strategies besides those that had been mentioned spontaneously during the critical incidents task.

Work Stressors Questionnaire. (= .94) The work stressor questionnaire consisted of 56 items adapted from a measure constructed by Davidson and Cooper (1983). Due to time constraints, we used a shortened version of the original 79 item scale. We eliminated some redundant items and added five items derived from the literature on working women and stress, e.g., feeling I have reached my career ceiling, feeling my behavior at work is noticed more than others, feeling that I am excluded from informal information-sharing sessions with colleagues of the opposite sex (Nieva &

Gutek, 1981).

We used this measure along with the critical incidents task because it allowed us to assess the degree of stress experienced due to a wider range of stressors. We also felt that this more quantitative measure would supplement the more qualitative data obtained via the critical incidents procedure.

Procedure. A sample of 222 female managers and an equal number of males matched to them for job posiiton and tenure were sent a questionnaire containing, among other measures, the BSRI and the Job Stress Scale. The subjects for this study were chosen from among those 126 female and 121 male respondents to the questionnaire who volunteered to participate in further research.

Approximately six months after having completed the questionnaire, the subjects participated in structured, tape-recorded interviews. As part of the critical incidents task, they were asked to describe two work-related situations (one general and one specific) that they had found stressful. Subjects then completed the WCCL in reference to each of the stressful situations they had described. At the end of

the interview subjects filled out the work stressors questionnaire.

The interviews were transcribed and a content analysis of the responses to the critical incidents task was undertaken. First, an exhaustive list of subcategories applicable to each response was created for each variable of interest: 1) the nature of the problem, 2) the reasons why situations were perceived as stressful, 3) coping with the problem, 4) coping with feelings about the problem, 5) sources of support, 6) functions of social support, and 6) supportive behaviors. For each varible separately, those subcategories that had a common theme were then grouped together under more general category headings.

All responses were assigned to the subcategories by a female rater. A second independent rater then assigned subjects' responses to categories. Inter-rater reliability assessed by Cohen's Kappa (Fleiss, 1981) was very respectable, with .66 being the lowest value obtained. All other kappas were .76 or higher.

Staged hierarchical multiple regression analyses were carried out with perceived job stress, work-related stressors, ways of coping in the general and

specific situations, and various indices of social support as the dependent variables. Sex, instrumentality, and expressivity were entered as the independent variables during the first stage. The instrumentality x expressivity interaction was entered during the second stage (Cohen, 1978).

Results

Although women reported experiencing more work-related stressors than men, $p < .03$, the only significant predictor of perceived job stress was expressivity, with managers higher in expressivity reporting less stress, $p < .04$.

Female managers tended to use self-blame more often than male managers to cope with the general, $p < .006$, but not with the specific, $p > .05$, work-related stressful situation that they had described.

Androgynous managers were less likely and undifferentiated managers were more likely than those in the other gender-role groups to report coping with both the general and the specific stressful situations by using wishful thinking, $p < .007$.

Expressivity was positively related to the receipt of emotional support, $p < .03$, and to overall support

resources, $p < .04$, for the specific, but not for the general situation, $p > .05$.

Discussion

Both sex and gender-role orientation were relevant to understanding stress, social support, and coping among managers. But, sex was a more important predictor of the number of stressors expereinced, whereas gender was a more important predictor of perceived stress, coping, and social support.

In regard to stress and stressors, we found evidence supporting two seemingly contradictory findings from the sex differences literature: 1) that female managers experience more work-related stressors than their male counterparts (Jick & Mitz, 1985; Nelson & Quick, 1985) but, 2) that there are no sex differences in overall levels of perceived occupational stress (Martocchio & O'Leary, 1989).

Some have attempted to explain these discrepant findings by postulating that women managers have better coping skills and/or are better able to utilize social support than men and that this buffers the negative effects of the additional stressors they experience. Because our results indicated that sex was not an

important predictor of coping style or social support utilization, we feel that this is unlikely. Instead, it appears that it is not their biological sex per se, but rather the high levels of expressivity that most women acquire through their sex-role socialization that may help to attenuate the negative effects of the stressors that they encounter.

Our results support the contention that few sex differences in coping with work stress emerge when males and females are equivalent in occupation and position. We found only that women coped more often than men by using self-blame and that this occurred only for general situations. Thus, it could be that previous findings of sex differences in coping among managers are partially attributable to the failure to control for differences in the characteristics of the jobs held by men and women. Often women are in lower level positions or those with restricted power and this may constrain the extent to which they can cope effectively through active problem-solving.

Our findings, although they indicated that gender-role orientation influenced coping and social support, were slightly different from those of past studies.

Whereas, previous research demonstrated that emotion-focused (Nezu & Nezu, 1987) and avoidance (Long, 1990) coping were related to low instrumentality, our results were that wishful thinking (an emotion-focused, avoidance strategy), was characteristic of those low in both instrumentality and expressiveness. Furthermore, we did not find any gender-role effects for problem-focused coping, although Long (1990) found it to be a function of expressiveness and Nezu and Nezu (1987) found it to be related to instrumentality. Our results did, however, appear to support the finding (Ashton & Fuehrer, in press; Burda, et al., 1984) that social support is related to high expressiveness. Perhaps the high levels of social support received by feminine managers contributed to their low levels of perceived job stress.

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